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Engineers tackle problem of power

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

BAGHDAD — Over candy and coffee at the Baghdad International Airport Sunday, top Iraqi engineers thrashed out with U.S. Army engineers the best way to turn lights back on in this city of 5 million.

The power would be restored in four days if GIs provided security, necessary tools and a crane with a 30-foot boom for electrical power line restoration, said Raas Al-Haris, a former Iraqi government electrical engineering project manager. "Time is very important. The people are waiting," Al-Haris said.

Army Brig Gen. Steve Hawkins — who supervises the effort to restore Iraq's power, water and sewerage — offered to meet the Iraqi requests. But he was less optimistic about the timeline for getting electricity restored. "You know, '*Inshallah*,'" he said, using the Arab expression for "God willing."

Electricity is the No. 1 utility goal, the general said. "It drives clean water. It drives sewage treatment. It drives getting basic services up," he said.

As the five Iraqi engineers and project managers, three of whom spoke English, described in detail the electrical power system in and around Baghdad, the Americans were a rapt audience, scribbling notes and politely interjecting questions. Soldiers became servers, scurrying about to fill coffee cups and bring in plates of chocolates for the Iraqis.

For their part, the Iraqis seemed impressed to be meeting with an American general and after some initial nervousness, were laughing and popping sweets in their mouths. They seemed eager to leave, though, when it was over, as if not altogether sure they wouldn't be taken prisoner. "OK, can we leave?" said Ihson Al Obidy, Iraqi director of electrical production.

Absolutely, Hawkins said. All they needed was that list of specific tools that the Iraqis would need before they gathered today at one of the city's power stations to begin work.

"We have no disagreements," Al-Haris said afterward. "These are human services, and we are very glad to work with them (the Americans) to have power for the facilities. The Americans are working to help us."

Hawkins said coalition forces took pains not to target the power grid, unless their troops came under fire from Iraqis in these locations.

A key task is restoring power lines between Baghdad and outlying generating stations in Mosul and Kirkuk. In the meantime, restoring power lines within the city will help bring back electricity to a core population there. Another important issue, however, is safety for workers repairing power lines, Al Obidy said.

The Iraqis said they have enough diesel and fuel oil on hand to keep power stations in Baghdad operating for a week to 10 days, but then they would need American assistance on obtaining more fuel.

The Iraqis said they would be ready to go work today at 8 a.m. at a power station in Baghdad. They said power plant workers were on hand and ready to return to work.

"We have an entire battalion of soldiers that do nothing but power generation," Hawkins told the city engineers.

At one point, Hawkins asked whether key power stations were built with Russian assistance. It might be necessary to track down spare parts, he said.

Al-Haris replied that one power plant was constructed with the help of the French, the other with American aid. "Westinghouse, GE," Al-Haris said.

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